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**NOTES FOR AN ADDRESS
BY THE
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MINISTER OF JUSTICE
ATTORNEY GENERAL OF CANADA**

**AT THE
COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS SYMPOSIUM**

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It is a pleasure to be here this morning at the Community Partnerships Symposium, and to see so many representatives from those organizations that are involved in the youth justice system. Educators, child advocates, researchers, lawyers, mental health workers, social workers, young people - all of you have a stake in the development of children and youth and in improving the youth justice system.

I especially want to thank those of you who took part in the round tables we held last fall and winter. The thoughtful and constructive feedback we received, sector by sector, led us to believe that the logical next step was to break down those sectoral barriers by bringing everyone together.

When the Government of Canada decided to overhaul the youth justice system several years ago, we did so in response to what Canadians were telling us. Most had lost confidence in the *Young Offenders Act*. The system didn't seem to be working very well, with ever increasing numbers of young people in jail for relatively minor offences.

The result was the Youth Justice Renewal Initiative, a cooperative initiative launched in consultation with the provinces, territories and experts in the field. Its best-known element is Bill C-3, the "Youth Criminal Justice Act", which is currently being studied in Committee. But the Youth Justice Renewal Initiative, as a whole, is much broader than this new law.

Despite what some might say, putting kids in jail, though sometimes necessary, is not an effective response to youth crime. Canadians instinctively know that youth justice requires a holistic approach -- one that ideally involves a high degree of cooperation among governments, social and health services, the court system, educators, families, victims, communities, youth and others.

The Youth Justice Renewal Initiative is designed to do this. It looks beyond the law to focus on the big picture.

It is an inclusive approach, which opens the door to greater public and professional collaboration, and it marks an enormous change, and challenge, in the way we work.

But how do we do this? How do we learn to work together, sharing information, devising more innovative solutions, breaking down turf barriers between professions and communities?

Over the next two days, you will focus on the themes of preventing crime, dealing effectively with conduct problems in the community, establishing partnerships with the youth justice system and supporting the rehabilitation and reintegration of young people in trouble with the law. You'll hear creative ideas from each sector and we hope that together you'll come up with innovative solutions that bridge sectors.

Crime prevention is a good place to begin. As emphasized in the Speech from the Throne, Canadians are proud of having built communities where people feel safe. It's a key component of our quality of life. But how do we ensure that our communities continue to be safe?

The Government of Canada believes that one way is to focus on young people and children. We have launched a number of initiatives that provide support for children at an early age and help to identify young people at risk.

These include the National Strategy on Community Safety and Crime Prevention, which is developing community-based responses to crime. Children and youth have been identified as priorities for the program. The government has committed \$32 million annually to help communities develop their own programs and partnerships.

Another initiative, the National Children's Agenda, focuses on further support for parents and families. Federal, provincial and territorial governments are working to reach agreement by December 2000 on a national action plan to increase resources and strengthen support for early childhood development.

We are looking at ways we can do more to protect children from being victims and to make the system more responsive to children's needs through changes to the *Criminal Code* and collaborative approaches like today's.

For children under 12 who do commit serious acts, we are looking at a range of solutions. These include better exchange of information among agencies, provision of a multi-dimensional emergency response and appropriate therapeutic support.

Last fall we hosted two conferences on youth justice. The first focused on Child Victimization and Child Offending, examining the factors which lead to both -- such as poverty, substance abuse and a family history of violence.

Because many of the same problems afflict Aboriginal communities, we hosted The Aboriginal Skills and Aboriginal Information Exchange. The three-day conference examined alternative justice programs for Aboriginal young people, focusing on restorative justice. This concept of justice, based on the traditional Aboriginal model for dealing with wrongdoing in the community, is now finding its way into the community.

It is also important to understand and find ways to deal with conduct problems in our community. Hyperactivity, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and Fetal Alcohol Effects, learning disabilities and other problems can manifest in behaviour problems in certain settings. Sometimes changing the environment so that it fits the child, rather than the other way around, is the most effective means of eliminating conduct problems.

Alternative schools have proven very effective in this respect, as have arts and recreation programs. Improving access to these programs should be one of our partnership goals.

The Government of Canada believes that in order to have an effective youth justice system, it is necessary to involve communities. Canada has one of the highest rates of youth incarceration and use of the formal court process for youth in the industrialized world, often for crimes of a minor nature. Other processes, like family group conferences run by the community itself, are often more meaningful and successful in dealing with youth crime.

Let me give you an example.

The Calgary Community Conferencing project provides an excellent example of the kind of cross-sectoral partnership we're talking about today. It was developed by Calgary Youth Probation Services in 1998 to address serious property and violent offences committed by young people.

The Calgary project provides Youth Court judges with alternatives to custody, police and prosecutors with alternatives to criminal charges, and schools with alternatives to suspensions.

Community-based agencies such as the Mennonite Central Committee, John Howard Society and Calgary Family Services work with the system-based Youth Probation Services, the Calgary Board of Education and the Calgary Police, bringing young offenders and their families together with victims to figure out a collective solution.

This is exactly the kind of cross-sectoral partnership we want to encourage, both at the community level and on a national basis. Few young people serve time under this system, and rates of recidivism are extremely low. But it also provides a sense of closure for the people involved.

Listen to the words of people who have been involved in these community conferences and you'll hear a lot -- empowerment, remorse, understanding, communication.

For the victims it means that their experience is acknowledged and validated by all participants. In the words of one, "the conference opened up the justice system to me and my family."

For the offender, it provides a second chance. A 16-year-old involved in the theft of an elderly woman's wedding ring, said "I can't give her back the ring, but at least I could apologize and then help shovel her walks in the winter. I feel better whether I go to jail or not."

The conferencing approach is used in other parts of the country. Anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a high rate of success, with few kids going to jail and few re-offending.

Restorative justice approaches like this one, where the goal is to resolve issues by involving families, victims and communities, clearly build support for the justice system and all those who work in it.

Restorative approaches are also helpful when a youth is under sentence or returning to the community after being in custody.

In the past, schools and the police were traditionally expected to pick up the pieces. But dealing with young people coming out of custody was hampered by several factors. For one, continuity of care from child welfare, educational services and mental health supports was often disrupted.

For another, youth themselves may not feel supported by these institutions, due to zero tolerance policies and significant power imbalances. The problem was compounded by the fact that the institutions too often worked independently.

That situation has begun to change. Working together, police and educators are finding new ways to support reintegration efforts. School administrators now sit on police outreach boards and police sit on school boards.

In Newfoundland, one school has hired an 'educational liaison officer' whose sole purpose is to build bridges with the justice system. When the school receives a student under sentence, it can set up programs involving all the stakeholders - the youth, the parents, the probation officers, the teachers and the child care workers.

Efforts like these succeed because they're based on cooperation and good will. But, as the roundtables have shown, it isn't as easy as it sounds. Working together effectively means changing the way we deal with issues of power, jurisdiction and communication.

Professionals have to respect and accept the validity of community processes. Cooperation has to be approached from a partnership point of view rather than seeing community as a tool to be manipulated for the purposes of a professional program.

This means finding out who in the community will be helpful. It means recognizing that the best method is not the one you have always used, but the one that works. It means listening to young people and listening to their families and friends to find out what training needs to be done. It means allowing a system to adjust to people, rather than the other way around.

And it means taking a good look at traditional roles. The conduct problems of youth are complicated and implicate many levels of government and many disciplines. Finding effective solutions requires innovation, creative approaches, good will, and cooperation.

With your different expertise and experience, I encourage you to consider what contribution you can make to addressing a social problem that is much larger than any one of us. Working in partnership is not easy but I have every confidence that your shared commitment to youth will lead to effective ways of working together for a common good.

This conference will get the ball rolling, but only that. The challenge for us is to continue what we've started here today by taking it to a regional level with your support and involvement.

I look forward to learning the results of your discussions and working with you over the next few years to advance social justice for youth.

Let me congratulate you for the efforts you have made. Your commitment will make all the difference. Thanks to you and others like you, youth justice in Canada will be much more than a new law; it will be a seamless web of support for Canadian youth.

Thank you.

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